

In the spring of 1848, the Fox family of Hydesville, a desolate New York hamlet, was nightly plagued by disembodied knocking. Events escalated on the evening of March 31, when John and Margaret Fox heard loud noises emanating from the room above in which their children, Katherine and Margaretta, were sleeping. This time the mysterious sounds appeared to indicate intelligence, apparently interacting with Katherine. When the child snapped her fingers or clapped her hands the entity, which she called 'Mr. Splitfoot,' would rap back in reply. Mrs. Fox bravely attempted to make contact, while her husband went for help. That night, a group of frightened neighbours watched Mrs. Fox communicate with the 'spirit' in the upstairs room, which knocked with such violence that one eyewitness, William Duesler, recorded that he 'felt the bedstead jar when the sound was produced' (Capron and Barron 15). As the presence could only affirm, deny and enumerate, Mrs. Fox asked a series of speculative questions to determine its identity and intent. This séance revealed that the ghost was benign, and that of a murdered peddler.

In the heavily evangelized 'burned-over district' of Upstate New York, news travelled fast. Older brother David Fox soon devised a laborious alphabetical method of communicating with spirits (the forerunner of Elijah Bond's 'Ouija Board'), while older sister Mrs. Leah Fish began to market the family's clairvoyance. This notoriety was greatly enhanced by the recent publication of Andrew Jackson Davis' *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind*, in which the 'Poughkeepsie Seer' prophesized that 'the truth that spirits commune ... will ere long present itself in the form of a living demonstration' (Davis v. I 675 – 676). The Fox sisters demonstrated and, initially supported by radical New York Quakers, their 'Spiritualism' quickly became a national sensation. Frank Podmore, of the Society for Psychical Research, estimated that there were over a hundred practicing mediums in New York alone by 1850 (Podmore v. I 183), while Augustus de Morgan likened the spread of mediums to smallpox (qtd. in Brandon 43).

Like many British intellectuals, de Morgan was converted by the Boston medium Mrs. Maria B. Hayden, who performed séances in London in 1853 at a guinea-a-head. Mrs. Hayden brought the new and widely reported 'faith' to the United Kingdom, and she was soon followed by even more flamboyant mediums, most notably Daniel Dunglas Home. Despite sceptical voices, including Dickens (who denounced Hayden in *Household Words*), the fundamentally optimistic, pseudo-religious theatricality of Spiritualism found easy purchase in the Victorian psyche.